Origins of Silent Reading: Timeline


4th C BCE: riddle in Antiphanes’ *Sappho* indicates silent reading; Alexander the Great silently reads letter from his mom.

Silent reading also mentioned by Suetonius and Plutarch without sense of ‘abnormality’ (Gilliard, 1993).

63 BCE: Julius Caesar silently reads love letter.

~45 BCE: Cicero writes of the greater pleasure of reading as opposed to hearing (as cited by Clark, 1931).

2nd C AD: On the Criterion, Claudius Ptolemy says, “sometimes people read silently when they are concentrating hard, because voicing the words is a distraction to thought” (as cited in Manguel, 1998, p. 43)

~349 AD: Saint Cyril of Jerusalem directs women (waiting for exorcism) to read “quietly, however, so that while their lips speak, no other ears may hear what they say – a whispered reading, perhaps.” (Manguel, 1998, p. 43)

384 AD: St Augustine unconsciously reads silently, observes St. Ambrose reading silently.

~6th C AD: ‘Letters have the power to convey to us silently the sayings of those who are absent’ (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, as cited in Manguel, 1998, p. 49).

8th C: text read aloud in scriptoriums for efficient scribing (Manguel, p. 50).

9th C: word separation and other punctuation appears, eases reading; regulation for silence in monastic scriptoriums (Manguel, p. 50).

14th C: shift from writing orally to writing in isolation shifts expectation that text will be read aloud to expectation it will be read silently; Nicholas de Lyra addresses himself in his writing to reader, not listener (Saenger, 1997, p. 258)

Late 17th, early 18th C: England: new model of reading + enough people in decent situation = opportunity → rise in literacy → niche for narrative, narrator, and the novel (Jajdelska, 2007)

19th C: Emerson reads silently in church, in bed; silent reading is common*

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*I expected to add the date of the first novel in this box. A quick Google search reveals this would not only be more complicated than initially thought but also incorrect.

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